

Social Engagement And Activism

10. The Renewed Violence Of Life Under The Pandemic And The Resistive Potential Of Photovoice

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The world is convulsed by an unusual pandemic; at least, unusual in the last century, because it initially wrought more devastation in the Global North than the Global South, though as we write, confirmed cases in the Americas overtook Europe.

Despite that difference, typical antinomies are in play when it comes to crises in the wealthy world. On one side is a predicted return to a supposedly latent savagery lurking within us all, initially indexed in overly-vigorous supermarket contests for sanitary masks, toilet paper, and packaged food. Survivalists await the second coming of *The Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954), with guns, ammunition, and ideology at the ready in well-stocked shelters. When US politicians attempt to censor scientists fighting both the climate crisis and this virus, many of us picture billionaires equipping their bunkers with materials “liberated” from public storage.

On the other side lies a Panglossian celebration, a supposed renewal of civil society. This is allegedly evident from Mediterranean and Manhattan terrace- and stoop-dwellers serenading health professionals and their derring-do, citizens collecting food for those in need, and folks finding innovative ways to make love not war, teach their children well, and take exercise. It's the putative equivalent of 1940s liberators or the spirit of the Blitz. But the Blitz was also a noteworthy moment in British criminal history, characterized by high levels of murder, sexual assault, and theft.

Unsurprisingly, there are surges in crime across the globe. In the countries where we live, Colombia has seen a longstanding wave of violence against indigenous environmental defenders intensify. They are slaughtered week after week by right-wing criminals working for shady, shadowy mining corporations. And Mexico experiences murders by the dozen as narco cartels battle for hegemony in towns and cities—the state absent, corrupt, or impotent—while social-media groups merrily organize to sack supermarkets and incite others to do the same. Police armed with automatic weapons patrol small suburban stores night and day. March 2020 became the deadliest month on record in Mexico—over two and half thousand homicides.

As local and national governments urge people to stay at home and maintain social distance to combat the spread of the virus, many women are confined with perpetrators of domestic violence, increasing their vulnerability to assault. Reports proliferate of abusive men luxuriating in the additional power over their female partners provided by lockdowns, insisting they not leave the house for fear of infection, and sometimes torturing and murdering them.

How do we define, count, interrogate, and study these human-rights violations? As scholars working in the prevailing conjuncture, we face the challenge of conducting relevant research contra domestic, environmental, and anti-indigenous violence.

We aim to contribute to that goal with a case study of five Colombian women who are living with perpetrators of intimate partner violence during this imposed social isolation.

We approached them in the hope of learning how they are coping during the quarantine. The idea is to understand women's experiences of violence and resistance in private spaces, from their own perspectives.

Our research is based on photovoice techniques. Photovoice is a participatory, community-based blend of a pictorial archive and grassroots activism that records even as it intervenes (Wang and Burris, 1997; Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Moletsane et al., 2015). Photovoice enables participants to express themselves spontaneously by producing images, creating new opportunities to reflect and represent community issues from creative and personal perspectives.

The photographs provide an instant preliminary approach to designing strategies against this latest normalization of domestic violence, inadvertently enabled by policies based in sound epidemiological advice. We hope to share them in the near future.

References

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